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# Some Symbols & Flags Used in LGBTI+ Subcultures

## Rainbow Pride and Related Symbols

The rainbow flag has become the easily-recognized colors of pride for the gay community. The multicultural symbolism of the rainbow is nothing new — Jesse Jackson's Rainbow Coalition also embraces the rainbow as a symbol of that political movement. The rainbow also plays a part in many myths and stories related to gender and sexuality issues in Greek, Native American, African, and other cultures.

Use of the rainbow flag by the gay community began in 1978 when it first appeared in the San Francisco Gay and Lesbian Freedom Day Parade. Borrowing symbolism from the hippie movement and black civil rights groups, San Francisco artist Gilbert Baker designed the rainbow flag in response to a need for a symbol that could be used year after year. Baker and thirty volunteers hand-stitched and hand-dyed two huge prototype flags for the parade. The flags had eight stripes, each color representing a component of the community: hot pink for sex, red for life, orange for healing, yellow for sun, green for nature, turquoise for art, indigo for harmony, and violet for spirit.

The next year Baker approached San Francisco Paramount Flag Company to mass-produce rainbow flags for the 1979 parade. Due to production constraints — such as the fact that hot pink was not a commercially-available color — pink and turquoise were removed from the design, and royal blue replaced indigo. This six-color version spread from San Francisco to other cities, and soon became the widely-known symbol of gay pride and diversity it is today. It is even officially recognized by the International Congress of Flag Makers. In 1994, a huge 30-foot-wide by one-mile-long rainbow flag was carried by 10,000 people in New York's Stonewall 25 Parade.

The rainbow flag has inspired a wide variety of related symbols, such as freedom rings and other accessories. There are plenty of variations of the flag, including versions with a blue field of stars reminiscent of the American Stars and Stripes and versions with superimposed lambdas, pink triangles, or other symbols.

The Victory Over AIDS Flag modifies the rainbow flag by adding a black stripe at the bottom. Suggested by a San Francisco group, the black stripe commemorates those we have lost to AIDS. Sergeant Leonard Matlovich, a much-decorated Vietnam Veteran dying of AIDS, proposed that when a cure is eventually found the black stripes should be removed from all the flags and ceremoniously burned in Washington, D.C.

## Pink Triangle and Related Symbols

The pink triangle is easily one of the more popular and widely-recognized symbols for the gay community. The pink triangle is rooted in World War II times, and reminds us of the tragedies of that era. Although homosexuals were only one of the many groups targeted for extermination by the Nazi regime, it is unfortunately the group that history often excludes. The pink triangle

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challenges that notion, and defies anyone to deny history.

The history of the pink triangle begins before WWII, during Adolf Hitler's rise to power. Paragraph 175, a clause in German law prohibiting homosexual relations, was revised by Hitler in 1935 to include kissing, embracing, and gay fantasies as well as sexual acts. Convicted offenders — an estimated 25,000 just from 1937 to 1939 — were sent to prison and then later to concentration camps. Their sentence was to be sterilized, and this was most often accomplished by castration. In 1942 Hitler's punishment for homosexuality was extended to death.

Each prisoner in the concentration camps wore a colored inverted triangle to designate their reason for incarceration, and hence the designation also served to form a sort of social hierarchy among the prisoners. A green triangle marked its wearer as a regular criminal; a red triangle denoted a political prisoner. Two yellow triangles overlapping to form a Star of David designated a Jewish prisoner. The pink triangle was for homosexuals. A yellow Star of David under a superimposed pink triangle marked the lowest of all prisoners — a gay Jew.

Stories of the camps depict homosexual prisoners being given the worst tasks and labors. Pink triangle prisoners were also a proportionally large focus of attacks from the guards and even other inmates. Although the total number of the homosexual prisoners is not known, official Nazi estimates were an underwhelming 10,000.

Although homosexual prisoners reportedly were not shipped en masse to the death camps at Auschwitz, a great number of gay men were among the non-Jews who were killed there. Estimates of the number of gay men killed during the Nazi regime range from 50,000 to twice that figure. When the war was finally over, countless many homosexuals remained prisoners in the camps, because Paragraph 175 remained law in West Germany until its repeal in 1969.

In the 1970s, gay liberation groups resurrected the pink triangle as a popular symbol for the gay rights movement. Not only is the symbol easily recognized, but it draws attention to oppression and persecution — then and now. In the 1980s, ACT-UP (AIDS Coalition To Unleash Power) began using the pink triangle for their cause. They inverted the symbol, making it point up, to signify an active fight back rather than a passive resignation to fate. Today, for many the pink triangle represents pride, solidarity, and a promise to never allow another Holocaust to happen again.

Like the pink triangle, the black triangle is also rooted in Nazi Germany. Although lesbians were not included in the Paragraph 175 prohibition of homosexuality, there is evidence to indicate that the black triangle was used to designate prisoners with anti-social behavior. Considering that the Nazi idea of womanhood focused on children, kitchen, and church, black triangle prisoners may have included lesbians, prostitutes, women who refused to bear children, and women with other "anti-social" traits. As the pink triangle is historically a male symbol, the black triangle has similarly been reclaimed by lesbians and feminists as a symbol of pride and solidarity.

Reportedly, the burgundy triangle may have been used to designate transgendered prisoners. Unfortunately, I have not yet found a resource to substantiate this suggestion.

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The Leather Pride Flag is a symbol for the leather community, which encompasses those who are into leather, Levis, sado-masochism, bondage and domination, uniform, cowboys, rubber, and other fetishes. The flag was created by artist Tony DeBlase and first displayed on May 28, 1989, at the Mr. Leather contest in Chicago. Although the flag is often common in the gay community, it is not a "gay-only" symbol.

Reportedly, gay leather aficionados might also modify a rainbow flag to have a black stripe instead of a violet one. (However, this version might be confused with the "Victory Over AIDS" version of the rainbow flag, as they are similar.)

The Bear Pride Flag is a symbol used by some "bears," gay men marked by an abundance of hair on their face, chest, and body. Bears also tend to be older, and perhaps larger or chubby. There does not seem to be one single symbol that represents bears in general. Rather, there are many symbols that have been adopted by local clubs, bars, and other bear groups.

The Bear Pride Flag shown below is from Spags, a Seattle bear bar. The colors of the flag represent the earth and the various bears that live between the sky and the ground. The golden yellow paw shaped sun represents the spirit and brotherhood of bears all over the world. The blue stripe represents the sky; white for polar bears; black for black bears; brown for brown bears; and green for Earth.

Another popular bear flag is the International Bear Brotherhood Flag, "designed with inclusivity in mind and represent[ing] the fur colors and nationalities of bears throughout the world." Thanks to merchandise availability and word-of-mouth, this flag has became the dominant bear flag within the community. Note that this symbol is copyright 1995, Craig Byrnes/Bear Manufacturing VA763-760.

### **Awareness Ribbon and Related Symbols**

The AIDS Awareness Ribbon, or red ribbon, is commonly seen adorning jacket lapels and other articles of clothing as a symbol of solidarity and a commitment to the fight against AIDS.

The Ribbon Project was conceived in 1991 by Visual AIDS, a New York-based charity group of art professionals that aims to recognize and honor friends and colleagues who have died or are dying of AIDS. Visual AIDS encourages arts organizations, museums, commercial galleries, and AIDS support groups to commemorate those lost to AIDS, to create greater awareness of AIDS/HIV transmission, to publicize the needs of Persons With AIDS, and to call for greater funding of services and research. Inspired by the yellow ribbons honoring American soldiers of the Persian Gulf War, the color red was chosen for its "connection to blood and the idea of passion — not only anger, but love, like a valentine," as stated by Frank Moore of Visual AIDS.

Worn by host Jeremy Irons, the ribbon made its public debut at the 1991 Tony Awards, and soon became a popular and politically correct fashion statement for celebrities and other awards ceremonies. Because of this popularity, some activists worry that the ribbon has become simple lip service to AIDS causes; in one particular incident the First Lady Barbara Bush wore a red ribbon while sitting in the audience with her husband, but when she stood at the President's side during his speech, her ribbon was conspicuously missing.

However, the Ribbon Project remains a powerful force in spreading awareness of AIDS and

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stressing the need for further action and research of the disease. The sincerest hope for the Ribbon Project is that it will one day no longer be needed.

Inspired by the red ribbon, the pink ribbon became the symbol for breast cancer awareness. Although, like AIDS, breast cancer is certainly not an issue limited to the gay community, the statistics of breast cancer are historically higher in women who do not bear children. Consequently, for some lesbians breast cancer awareness and prevention is a particularly important issue.

Yellow ribbons have historically been used to raise awareness for POW/MIA persons, hostages, and human rights and equality movements. Additionally, the politically-correct nature of the times seems to have spawned even more ribbon variations. Green ribbons are worn by environmental activists, particularly those in the entertainment industry concerned about the use of tropical plywood in movie sets. Purple ribbons signify the toll of urban violence; blue ribbons promote awareness of crime victims' rights. (More recently, blue ribbons have also been adopted by the campaign against Internet censorship.) With all these ribbon variations, it is important to realize that no one cause is trying to take attention away from the others; in one way or another, all are equally important to humanity

### **Gender Pride and Related Symbols**

Gender Symbols are common astrological signs handed down from ancient Roman times. The pointed Mars symbol represents the male and the Venus symbol with the cross represents the female. Double interlocking male symbols have been used by gay men since the 1970s. Double interlocking female symbols have often been used to denote lesbianism, but some feminists have instead used the double female symbols to represent the sisterhood of women. These same feminists would use three interlocking female symbols to denote lesbianism. Also, some lesbian feminists of the 1970s used three interlocking female symbols to represent their rejection of male standards of monogamy.

Also in the 1970s, gay liberation movements used the male and female symbols superimposed to represent the common goals of lesbians and gay men. These days, the superimposed symbols might also denote a heterosexual aware of the differences and diversity between men and women. A transgendered person might superimpose the male and female symbols in such a way that the arrow and cross join on the same single ring.

The astrological sign of Mercury is traditionally the symbol of transgendered peoples. In Greek mythology, Hermes (the Greek version of the Roman god Mercury) and Aphrodite (the goddess of love) had a child named Hermaphroditus. That child possessed both male and female sexual organs, hence the term hermaphrodite. Also, rituals associated with the worship of Aphrodite are believed to have been highly sexual, involving castration, transvestism, and homosexual relations.

In the symbol itself, the crescent moon at the top is supposed to represent the masculine, and the cross at the bottom represents the feminine. The ring represents the individual, with the male and the female balanced at either side.

Inspired by the gender symbols, the Transgender Symbol is another icon for transgendered peoples. This symbol combines the lavender color and the pink triangle shape with a ring

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denoting various genders all fused into one. Although this is not a public domain symbol, you can use it for non-commercial purposes to denote transgendered or gender-supportive individuals.

## Miscellaneous Symbols

The lambda symbol seems to be one of the most controversial of symbols in regards to its meaning. There are several differing opinions as to why the lambda was chosen as a gay symbol and what it really means. However, most sources agree on a few things:

The lambda was first chosen as a gay symbol when it was adopted in 1970 by the New York Gay Activists Alliance. It became the symbol of their growing movement of gay liberation. In 1974, the lambda was subsequently adopted by the International Gay Rights Congress held in Edinburgh, Scotland. As their symbol for lesbian and gay rights, the lambda became internationally popular.

But where history ends, speculation begins. No one seems to have a definitive answer why the lambda was originally chosen as a gay symbol. Some suggest that it is simply the Greek lower-case letter l for liberation. Others disagree, citing the use of lambda in physics to denote energy (the energy we have when we work in concert) or wavelength (are gays and lesbians on a different wavelength?). Lambda may also denote the synergy of the gay movement, the idea that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. The lambda also may represent scales and balance, and the constant force that keeps opposing sides from overcoming each other — the hook at the bottom of the right leg signifies the action needed to reach and maintain balance. The ancient Greek Spartans regarded the lambda to mean unity, while the Romans considered it "the light of knowledge shed into the darkness of ignorance." Reportedly, Ancient Greeks placed the lambda on shields of Spartan warriors, who were often paired off with younger men in battle. (There was a theory that warriors would fight more fiercely knowing that their lovers were both watching and fighting alongside them.)

Whatever the exact meaning and origin, the lambda originally embodied a fairly militant connotation. Today, the symbol generally denotes lesbians' and gay men's concerns together. Although the lambda was never intended to be linked to any specific gender or orientation such as other symbols may be, historically this is not so: In the early 1970s the Los Angeles gay community created a flag with a lavender lambda on a simple white background. They hoped the flag would catch on to other cities, but their hopes were not realized because some saw the lambda as a male symbol only.

The labrys is a double-sided hatchet or axe commonly used in ancient European, African, and Asian matriarchical societies as both a weapon and a harvesting tool. Greek artwork depicts the amazon armies of Europe wielding labrys weapons. Amazons ruled with a dual-queen system in which one queen was in charge of the army and battle, and the other queen stayed behind to administer the conquered cities. Amazons were known to be ferocious and merciless in battle, but once victorious they ruled with justice. Today, the labrys is a lesbian and feminist symbol of strength and self-sufficiency.

In addition, the labrys also played a part in ancient mythology. Demeter, the goddess of the earth, used a labrys as her scepter. Rites associated with the worship of Demeter, as well as Hecate (the goddess of the underworld), are believed to have involved lesbian sex.

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The Bi Pride Flag (not pictured) was introduced in late 1998 by Michael Page. While the popular rainbow flag and pink triangle symbols are generally considered to represent gays and lesbians, the Bi Pride Flag was designed specifically with Bi people in mind. The three-color flag (pink, blue, and purple) symbolizes attraction to the same sex, the opposite sex, and both sexes. For full details, please visit this site.

The purple hand (not pictured) was a short-lived symbol of protest dating back to the 1970s in San Francisco. Derived from the New York "Black Hand" Mafia gang name, this symbol was supposedly born in the San Francisco Examiner offices when a group protesting a homophobic editorial had purple ink poured on them. The protesters then proceeded to imprint their purple hands all over the side of the building.

Another obscure symbol from the 1970s is the lavender rhinoceros. Supposedly used as an activist symbol, it was chosen because the rhino is generally a peaceful animal, but when provoked becomes extremely ferocious.

A RIA visitor adds the following information: "The lavender rhinoceros was created as a symbol to increase awareness of the presence of gays and lesbians in American Society. It was created by two Boston artists, Daniel Thaxton and Bernie Toale. Its first appearance was in a series of Boston subway posters during 1973. The rhinoceros is characterized by a peaceful demeanor until threatened, and so seemed an appropriate symbol for the years following Stonewall. The heart on the rhinoceros reflects the common humanity of all people, and the color lavender is a symbol of our identity.

*2005, jasewells.com/gayicons*